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Soviet Naval Exercises With Third World Countries

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An Intelligence Assessment

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July 1985

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and
queries are welcome and may be directed to the
Chief, Third World Activities Division, SOVA [redacted]

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Soviet Naval Exercises With Third World Countries

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 1 June 1985 was used in this report.

Combined naval exercises with Third World countries are becoming an increasingly important feature of the Soviet military assistance program. The Soviet Navy first held small-scale exercises with Third World countries in the late 1960s, using amphibious assault exercises in the Mediterranean to train the Egyptian and Syrian Navies. In 1971 the Soviets began exercising periodically with the Cuban Navy. In the 1980s the number, complexity, and scope of combined exercises have increased as has the number of countries operating with the Soviets. Since 1980 the USSR has conducted some 14 exercises with Syria, Libya, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), Ethiopia, Cuba, and Vietnam—countries whose navies are mostly Soviet supplied. It has sought exercises with other countries—including India, Algeria, and Madagascar—that also rely on Soviet naval exports, but so far has had no success.

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Most Soviet combined exercises have been designed to provide a political show of support for Moscow's Third World clients by warning of a possible Soviet military confrontation, particularly with the West, and to counter the extensive US program of combined exercises:

- The Soviets conducted a fairly large-scale antisubmarine warfare and coastal defense exercise with Syria in mid-1981. Although planned earlier, the exercise probably was expanded to show Moscow's firm commitment to Damascus during the period of heightened tensions after Syria placed air defense missiles for the first time in Lebanon.
- The large Soviet-Vietnamese amphibious assault exercise that occurred last year during Sino-Vietnamese border clashes signaled a Soviet willingness to use military operations to demonstrate support for Vietnam against the Chinese.
- Several exercises over the past five years with South Yemen and Ethiopia probably have been aimed at showing support for their pro-Soviet regimes and at counterbalancing US exercises in the Indian Ocean area.

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Moreover, Moscow has benefited from its naval operations with key Third World clients by preparing its forces for possible intervention in regional conflicts. The Soviets probably also see such exercises as a means to gain

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more access to Third World naval facilities, and may even hope to enlarge their close allies' potential to supplement Soviet naval capabilities in a general war with the West. So far, however, Third World forces have not played a role in any exercise directed from the Soviet Union, indicating that they do not currently figure in Moscow's calculus of its wartime assets. Moreover, these countries presumably would prefer to remain outside superpower confrontations. []

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Moscow's Third World clients have gained important military experience and political support from the combined exercises, and they probably welcome—indeed, even request—such operations as a public reminder of Soviet backing:

- Libya probably requested Soviet participation in their first combined naval exercise in 1982, probably held to demonstrate Libya's capabilities in the wake of the 1981 shootdown of Libyan fighters by US naval aircraft in the Gulf of Sidra.
- The Soviet Navy has operated most extensively with the Cubans, helping to make them the most capable navy among Third World states in the region. The exercises also reaffirm the Soviet right to operate in Caribbean waters.

The Soviets have stressed antisubmarine and antiship warfare and coastal defense tactics during combined exercises, primarily to improve their allies' capabilities to counter the threats posed by hostile regional navies. []

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During the remainder of the decade we expect a modest increase in Soviet use of combined naval exercises, particularly in the Mediterranean, Caribbean, and South China Seas, to secure influence in the Third World. Moscow will be most successful in expanding exercises with traditional allies that face a major regional opponent—particularly Cuba, Syria, and Vietnam. More important, as the scope, scale, and frequency of combined exercises expand, these operations may begin to figure more prominently in the USSR's calculus of its wartime capabilities and, at a minimum, to complicate US naval planning. We see little prospect, however, that the Soviets will be able to broaden their program to include such clients as India, Algeria, or Madagascar. These countries profess nonaligned policies and probably want to avoid the kind of closer military relationship that would result from combined exercises. []

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Considering the relative success of their program of combined naval exercises, we believe that the Soviets may well extend this practice into joint air or ground forces operations in the Third World. The deployment of Soviet ground or air forces to a client's soil probably would be perceived as an even firmer signal of Soviet support. The Soviets have not conducted such exercises thus far in the Third World, probably to refrain from demonstrating so strong a commitment of forces to an ally and to avoid provoking a negative reaction from other regional states. Nevertheless, over the next several years the USSR may practice moving small representative units of ground and air forces into a distant area to exercise with client forces in response to a hypothetical regional crisis. Initially, limitations on Soviet power-projection capabilities probably would restrict such exercises to allies close to the Soviet periphery, like Syria. But over the longer term, as these capabilities improve, the Soviets may be willing to exercise with more distant allies.

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Chronology of Soviet Combined Naval Exercises in the Third World, 1980-85

Dates	
USSR-South Yemen	May 1980
USSR-Cuba	April-May 1981
USSR-Syria	July 1981
USSR-Vietnam	October 1981
USSR-Libya	October 1982
USSR-Cuba	December 1982
USSR-Vietnam	March-April 1983
USSR-South Yemen	March-April 1983
USSR-Libya	July 1983
USSR-Vietnam	April 1984
USSR-Cuba	April-May 1984
USSR-Ethiopia-South Yemen	May 1984
USSR-Vietnam	September 1984
USSR-Cuba	January-February 1985

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Soviet Naval Exercises With Third World Countries

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Regional Trends

The USSR has taken advantage of opportunities in several regions to use combined naval exercises to further its political and military goals in the Third World (see table). The success of these exercises differs widely among the regions as do the constraints on Soviet abilities to capitalize on joint military cooperation. Moscow's military and economic support for Vietnam, for example, has resulted in a substantial Soviet naval buildup in the South China Sea, and the Soviets used an amphibious exercise held with the Vietnamese last spring to demonstrate that Soviet interests and capabilities must be taken into consideration by regional countries and the United States. Increasingly complex naval exercises held between the USSR and Cuba contribute to the development of Cuban military capabilities, which far outdistance those of other Third World states in the region, while asserting Moscow's right to operate in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico.

Soviet naval cooperation with certain allies in the Middle East, South Asia, and on the Arabian Peninsula, however, appears to be more constrained by those countries' nationalistic or nonaligned attitudes and their political objectives. Combined naval exercises in these regions often aim primarily at improving the ally's naval capabilities or occur only when both the USSR and its ally perceive a need to demonstrate Soviet commitment.

Middle East

The Middle East has received Moscow's greatest attention in the Third World in terms of combined naval exercises, primarily because it is so near the USSR and so critical to Western economic and strategic interests. Soviet naval ships began operating continuously in the Mediterranean in 1964, and, after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the force was designated a squadron by the Soviets. The squadron is normally composed of about 45 ships, including seven attack submarines, eight surface combatants, and about 30 auxiliaries and other ships. In peacetime it monitors

Western naval forces, patrols choke points, provides support to clients, and is positioned for possible combat operations. During regional conflicts, particularly Arab-Israeli wars, the squadron has nearly always been reinforced but has not played a combat role.

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Soviet naval ships operating in the Mediterranean rely for logistic support mostly on their own auxiliaries stationed at anchorages or at ports in Syria and Libya. The USSR also uses some Yugoslav and Tunisian naval facilities to refurbish Mediterranean-deployed submarines and submarine tenders, but this access is strictly controlled.

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During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Soviet Navy conducted several amphibious landing exercises with the Egyptian Navy, its first combined exercises in the Third World. The Egyptians terminated Soviet use of all their air and most of their naval facilities in 1972, however, and in 1976 all Soviet military personnel were expelled from Egypt. Since then, the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron has operated only with Syrian and Libyan forces. Soviet naval units conducted small-scale landing exercises in the late 1960s and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) training throughout the 1970s with the Syrian Navy, and the two countries held a larger, more complex exercise in 1981, possibly in response to events in Lebanon. Libya has participated in two exercises with the Soviets during the 1980s;

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Syria relies exclusively on the USSR for naval training, for almost the entire Syrian Navy has been provided by the Soviets. Libya, however, purchases naval ships and weapons from several countries and has other options for gaining naval experience.

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The USSR has supplied Algeria with most of its naval units, but so far Moscow has not been able to persuade the Algerians to hold combined naval exercises.

spare parts and perhaps weapons will ensure a continued military relationship between the two countries.

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Syria. The USSR's first large-scale combined naval exercise with Syria was in July 1981. The exercise was a significant political event in that it occurred amid the substantial augmentation of both US and Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean in response to escalating tensions between Israel and Syria over the placement of Syrian air defense missiles in Lebanon. Although the exercise evidently had been

Over the past several years, Algeria has refused to allow regular repair or replenishment of Soviet ships in Algerian ports. Even if Algeria maintains this policy with regard to Soviet access to military facilities and naval cooperation, a steady need for Soviet

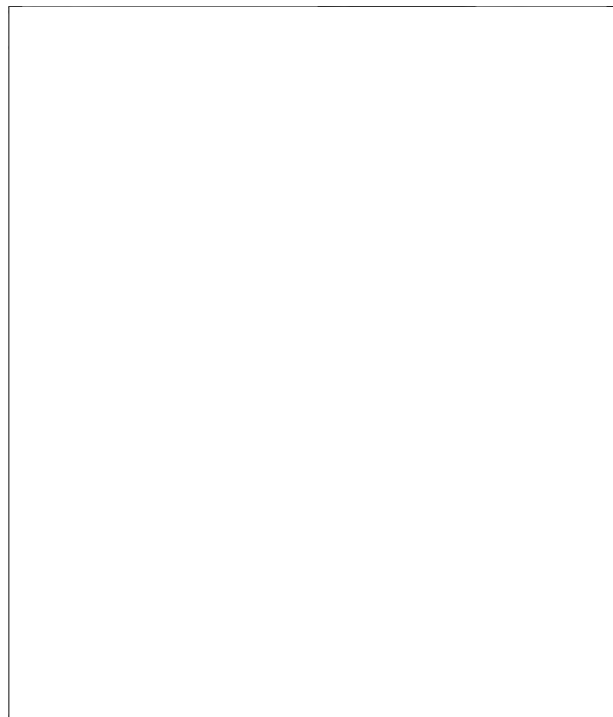
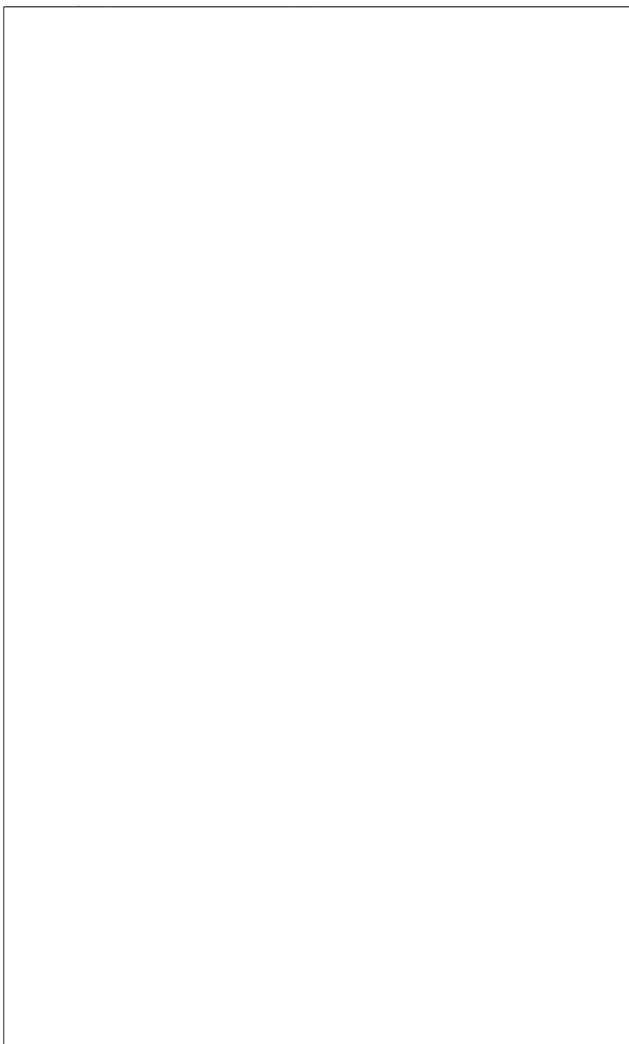
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Syria probably also hoped that, in addition to improving its navy, joint operations would magnify the perception of its war-fighting capabilities by regional states. Both countries took advantage of the opportunity for local publicity with brief port calls by Soviet landing ships, shore leave for the Soviet crews, and a parade of Syrian naval and air forces after the exercises. 

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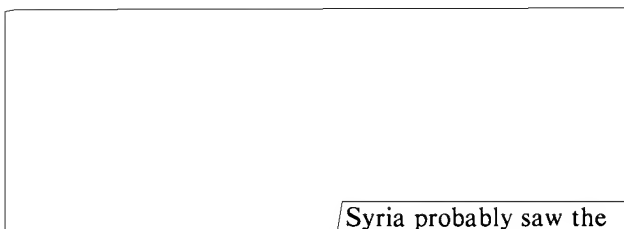
planned several months before, the Soviets subsequently claimed that it was a direct response to Israeli belligerence. It is more likely that the scope of the exercise was expanded because of the instability in Lebanon and to firmly signal a Soviet commitment to Syria. 

While the political implications of the exercise outweighed the military significance, some aspects of the joint training were noteworthy. It was the first Soviet amphibious operation in the Mediterranean since the bulk of the Soviet personnel left Egypt in 1972. 


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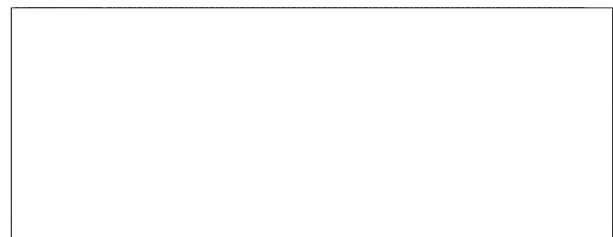
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 Syria probably saw the exercise as a means of reinforcing its claim to a central role among the Arab states and affirming Soviet political and military support of Damascus.



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[REDACTED]

The continued tensions between Israel and Syria over Lebanon increase the prospects, in our view, that President Assad will permit more joint exercises to demonstrate Soviet support for Syrian goals in the area. Moscow ultimately may be successful, by using promises of continued high levels of arms assistance, at obtaining increased military access and cooperation. So far, however, Damascus has been careful not to allow the Soviet Navy unrestricted use of its ports and airfields. [REDACTED]

Libya. After a hiatus of over a decade, the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron in 1981 resumed port calls to Libya and apparently was granted permission to perform maintenance of Soviet submarines using a Soviet repair ship at the isolated port of Tobruk. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

The Libyans have not operated with the Soviet Navy since 1983, but they have held increasingly comprehensive naval, air, and ground exercises on their own.

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In July 1983 the Libyan Navy, probably with some assistance by Soviet ships, held its largest naval exercise ever. As in the first combined exercise, these operations apparently were dedicated to training the Libyans in the defense of their waters and coasts against an aggressor force. [REDACTED]

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**Arabian Peninsula, Horn of Africa,
and Indian Ocean Regions**

The main Soviet goals in the Indian Ocean, especially the region around the Arabian Peninsula, are to counter or limit the US military presence and to promote regimes responsive to Soviet interests. Since 1968 the size and composition of Soviet naval forces in the Indian Ocean have fluctuated widely, driven by the level of US naval forces deployed to the region as well as by Soviet interests there.

support the airlift and sealift of Soviet military supplies to Ethiopia.

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regional crisis or specific military threat to South Yemen or Ethiopia, and they probably were intended primarily to show broader support for their pro-Soviet regimes. [redacted]

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South Yemen. The first combined exercise involving the Soviet Navy in the Indian Ocean region was held with the South Yemeni Navy in May 1980 [redacted]

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The USSR and South Yemen again held a combined naval exercise in April 1983. These operations probably involved a greater role for the South Yemeni Navy and apparently included an amphibious landing and joint ASW maneuvers. [redacted]

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Since the Soviets were ousted from Somalia in 1977, the USSR has concentrated on gaining access for its naval forces to facilities in South Yemen and Ethiopia. Ethiopia's Dehalak' Deset (Dahlak Island) in the Red Sea has become the primary maintenance and repair facility for the ships of the Indian Ocean Squadron, although the Soviets have invested little in fixed facilities there, preferring to rely on their auxiliaries. In South Yemen, the squadron uses the port of Aden, where ships generally anchor in the harbor, or uses anchorages near South Yemen's Socotra Island.

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The USSR has supplied both South Yemen and Ethiopia with virtually all of their naval equipment since the mid-1970s, and the South Yemenis now have one of the largest forces of amphibious and missile attack craft in the region. Both navies are dependent on the Soviet Union for spare parts and maintenance. The Soviets have operated with the South Yemeni Navy at least twice and possibly three times and with the Ethiopians once [redacted]. None of these exercises was held in reaction to any

Ethiopia. In May 1984 the USSR apparently conducted its first multinational exercise with Ethiopian and South Yemeni naval units. The exercise lasted several days in the area north of Dahlak Island and probably included the flagship of the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron; [redacted]

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Southeast Asia

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Soviet military activities in Southeast Asia have become increasingly important to the USSR as a means of exerting pressure on China, competing with US forces stationed in the area, and facilitating deployments to the Indian Ocean. The USSR's posture in Southeast Asia hinges mainly on its close relationship with Vietnam. Hanoi depends heavily on Soviet aid to sustain its crippled economy, consolidate its control in Cambodia, and deter or counter the Chinese on its northern borders. Since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border conflict, the Soviets have provided Vietnam massive economic support and military aid in exchange for extensive naval logistic and operating privileges at Cam Ranh Bay.

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India. No formal naval exercises between India and the USSR have ever been reported. Despite the growing number of advanced Soviet surface ships, submarines, and aircraft procured by the Indian Navy, India has been careful to guard its nonaligned policy and obviously is concerned that visible operations with the Soviet Navy would compromise its position. In addition, the Indian Navy is both larger and more sophisticated than those of other Soviet Third World clients, and the Indians may see less to gain from operating with the Soviet Navy.

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Madagascar. Since the late 1970s, the Soviets also have attempted to expand their political influence and military access in Madagascar, to include combined naval exercises. President Ratsiraka, however, consistently has upheld Madagascar's nonaligned status and adhered to a policy of denying foreign military access to ports and airfields.

In addition, a close working relationship is developing between the Vietnamese and Soviet Navies. Most of the Vietnamese naval equipment has been provided by the USSR, and Soviet military advisers probably are active at high administrative and operational levels of that service. Soviet naval personnel, for example, probably are on board Vietnamese naval ships during most exercises.

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Latin America

Latin America's distance from the USSR presents practical military constraints that probably account for the lower levels of Soviet naval presence there than in other Third World areas. Nevertheless, the Soviets have exercised more frequently and consistently with the Cuban Navy than with that of any other Third World country. Indeed, their military relationship with Cuba has furnished the Soviets opportunities to assert their right to operate in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico and generally to play a broader political role in the region. [REDACTED]

Cuba remains the single most important Soviet client in the Third World and is the hub of Soviet access to the Caribbean. It is ideally located for Soviet intelligence collection activities against the United States, provides an entree for further Soviet involvement in

the region, and serves Soviet foreign policy goals in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere. [REDACTED]

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Both the level of the Soviet military presence and the scope of activities in Cuba have steadily increased over the past two decades. Continued military involvement there seems virtually guaranteed, moreover, in view of Castro's close relationship with the Soviets and Havana's increasingly heavy debt to Moscow. Following the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, a small Soviet ground force contingent was gradually expanded to brigade size. [REDACTED]

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[redacted]

Soviet naval task group visits began in 1969, and the 24th such deployment was concluded in February 1985. These task groups typically involve two principal surface combatants, an oiler, and sometimes a submarine, and they now deploy to the Caribbean about once a year. During these visits, the Soviet ships dock and take on supplies at Cuban naval bases, because there are no dedicated Soviet naval facilities in the Caribbean. [redacted]

All Soviet task groups visiting Cuba since late 1971 have operated with Cuban naval forces [redacted]. Combined naval exercises in the early 1970s primarily

involved ASW operations in Cuban territorial waters.

[redacted]

During the 1980s, Soviet-Cuban naval exercises have become an increasingly important feature of the Soviet naval deployments to Cuba and are becoming both more extensive and more complex. [redacted]

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Soviet and Third World Motivations

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Where we have evidence of participation by a Third World country in combined naval exercises, the USSR usually has been the instigator, and its objectives have been both political and military. The Soviets clearly view these military operations as an important tool to increase their influence in a region and to project a military presence in distant areas such as the Indian Ocean and the South China and Caribbean Seas. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Political Objectives

Combined exercises serve as a *political show of support* for Moscow's Third World clients. For example, the USSR publicly asserted that the combined amphibious and ASW exercise off the Levant coast in 1981 was in direct response to Israeli provocations over Syrian air defense missiles in Lebanon. The crisis was overtaken by other events in Lebanon, but Syria did not remove the missiles and Moscow probably took credit, at least with the Syrians, for effectively challenging Israel. Furthermore, the 1982 Soviet-Libyan exercise probably was held partly in response to the shootdown of Libyan fighters by US naval aircraft in mid-1981. The Soviets probably intend such exercises to warn of a possible military confrontation with the West if their client is attacked or its interests threatened. [REDACTED]

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The USSR consistently seeks to *counter or undermine US influence* in the Third World. In some cases the Soviets press for exercises to serve as a counterweight to certain US combined military exercises—such as “Cobra Gold” with the Thai Navy in the Gulf of Thailand and “Bright Star” with the Egyptian and Omani military forces in the Mediterranean and Red Seas—and to US naval maneuvers off Latin America. The Soviets' largest combined exercises with Third World countries have been in these same areas. Although the Soviet exercises do not approach the scale of US combined operations or major Soviet fleet exercises closer to the USSR, they are another signal of Moscow's determination to compete with the United States for influence and access to these regions. [REDACTED]

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Observations of recent combined exercises indicate that the seamanship and capability of the Cuban Navy have progressed considerably over the past five years, and they probably will continue to improve as more opportunities to exercise with the Soviets are presented. [REDACTED]

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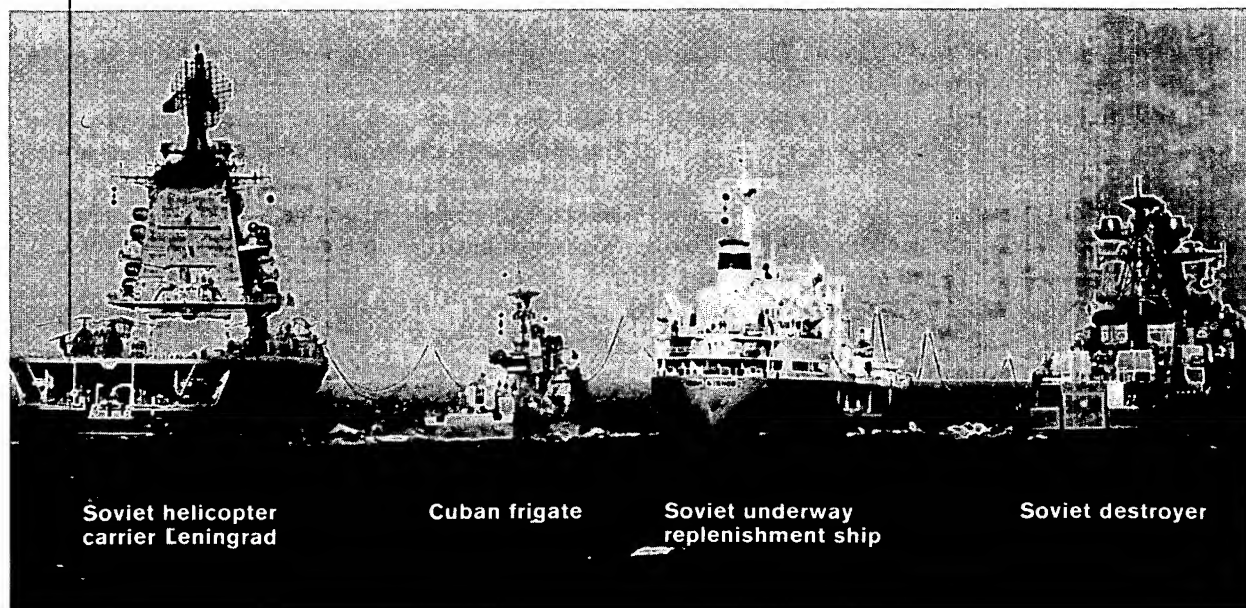


Figure 8. Combined naval operations in the Gulf of Mexico, April 1984; underway replenishment of Soviet and Cuban warships

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Moscow also uses combined operations to *increase its influence* within a Third World country's military forces and probably hopes this will promote closer political ties as well. The navies of Cuba and Vietnam have adopted Soviet-style tactics and organization, and the combined operations reinforce these developments.

Soviet Military Goals

The chief military value to the USSR of combined exercises probably is the *experience in operating in a distant area* with Third World navies. During a regional crisis in which the Soviet Navy offered or was asked to provide support for a client, any previous training would help to ease the complex problems that almost certainly would arise in coordinating combat or support operations.

Combined naval training also is one of many military instruments (which also include arms sales and military advisers) that Moscow uses to press countries for *increased military cooperation, including increased access to facilities*. The Soviets already have parlayed military assistance into access to some facilities in all six of the countries that participate in combined exercises. Thus far, however, combined exercises have

reinforced already existing relationships; earlier provisions of weapons probably have had far more impact on the countries' decisions to grant such access.

The USSR also may hope that combined naval exercises can be used to *groom certain Third World navies to supplement Soviet capabilities* during wartime. Although we have no evidence to support such an intention, most of the clients with whom they exercise are located near states hostile to the USSR or on maritime routes that would be important for the transit of naval forces and supplies during wartime. (Vietnam, for example, is close to the Strait of Malacca, connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the Cuban Navy could operate in the Florida Straits or the windward passage into the Caribbean.) The Soviets have stressed training Third World clients in ASW and antiship tactics, possibly in part because Moscow may expect these navies eventually to help the Soviet Navy counter hostile submarines and ships in distant areas. The naval capabilities of these countries are limited, however, and we have

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never seen Third World forces employed in any exercise directed from the Soviet Union. These countries, moreover, almost certainly would prefer to avoid having their navies dragged into superpower conflicts.

Third World Motivations

Probably the most important benefit derived by Third World countries from combined naval exercises is the *visible demonstration of Soviet military support for their regimes and policies*. The USSR has been most successful in negotiating joint exercises with countries like Cuba, Vietnam, and Syria that face a predominant, neighboring, hostile power. These countries probably feel they could not compete with or confront these powers without Moscow's military and political support, and they welcome joint operations as a public reminder of this backing. Some of Moscow's Third World clients probably have initiated requests to hold combined exercises, as Libya presumably did after the Gulf of Sidra confrontation. Communist leaders such as those in Cuba and Vietnam and Marxists such as those in South Yemen and Ethiopia probably also perceive that combined exercises demonstrate Soviet support for their regimes.

Combined naval operations with the Soviet Union also *enhance the prestige of a Third World navy*. These exercises display the country's growing military capabilities to other nations in the region and signal that the country is a power to be reckoned with, given its strong military ties to the Soviet Union. Countries like Cuba, South Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Vietnam probably also intend the exercises to counterbalance US military operations with other countries in the region.

Finally, Moscow's Third World clients probably realize that combined naval training helps to *sharpen their forces' military skills*. Because most of their ships and weapons are Soviet supplied, they depend on Soviet instruction in employing and maintaining their naval systems. Most of these countries have a limited maritime tradition, if any, and combined exercises under the tutelage of the USSR are useful for learning operational naval tactics. During a regional conflict, these countries' navies primarily would face hostile submarines, missile patrol boats, and amphibious assault ships. The Soviets' emphasis on ASW,

antiship, and coastal defense tactics in combined exercises probably is intended to improve their allies' capabilities to counter these threats. Indeed, navies like those of Cuba and Vietnam that have operated frequently with the Soviet Navy have shown considerable improvement in ASW capabilities, although they still probably would be unable to locate and destroy Western submarines.

Outlook

We expect a modest increase over the next five years or so in the frequency and scale of Soviet combined naval exercises with Third World allies. Soviet officials probably are pressing arms customers in the Third World to hold more combined exercises to strengthen existing relationships and create new opportunities to expand Soviet influence. The Soviets will be most successful in promoting joint operations with traditional clients like Cuba, Vietnam, and Syria that have major regional opponents. Their need for strong Soviet support, especially during regional crises, provides Moscow leverage to use combined naval exercises to help bolster these regimes, to reinforce Soviet influence with local military and political cadres, and to influence regional security relations more generally.

The Soviets probably will continue to be unsuccessful in holding combined naval exercises with countries such as India and Algeria that evidently do not want a stronger alignment with the USSR. India and Algeria depend on Soviet weapons, but Moscow almost certainly would not jeopardize its military trade with either country by forcing the issue of naval cooperation. Under present conditions, there also appears to be little opportunity for the Soviet Navy to operate more frequently with Libya. The Libyan Navy stages only about one major exercise a year and probably will continue to conduct these alone to gauge its progress as an independent fighting force. Exercises in alternate years or smaller scale training with the Soviet Navy are likely, however.

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The trends toward more complexity and wider scope in Soviet-Third World combined naval exercises are likely to continue. Such exercises in the late 1960s and 1970s usually focused on improving one specific area of a country's naval capabilities, such as ASW or amphibious assault. More recent naval exercises held with Syria, Vietnam, and Cuba, however, have featured multiphased scenarios incorporating ASW, antiship, and amphibious assault operations. []

More important, as the scope, scale, and frequency of combined exercises increase, they may begin to figure more prominently in the USSR's calculus of its wartime capabilities against Western naval forces. While the antiship and ASW capabilities of Third World navies currently are limited, over the next decade some navies—the Cuban, Vietnamese, Syrian, and possibly the South Yemeni—will gradually improve and thus could further complicate US naval planning. While these countries almost certainly would prefer to remain outside any superpower confrontation, this could prove to be increasingly difficult for states where Soviet naval combat forces are stationed. []

The Caribbean

Soviet naval task groups visiting Cuba probably will increasingly emphasize combined exercises to improve Cuba's status as a regional military power and to reinforce the USSR's claim to free access to the Caribbean operating area. Future operations in the Gulf of Mexico probably will include participation by Cuban warships in both ASW and antiship training. Additionally, the Soviets and Cubans could very well begin to practice amphibious exercises, including opposed landings on Cuban beaches, to demonstrate the Cuban ability to counter such assaults as well as to exhibit the improved Cuban assault capabilities to regional states. It is even possible that, over the next several years, the Soviet and Cuban Navies could hold combined exercises near Nicaragua to demonstrate their support for the Sandinista regime. []

Southeast Asia

We expect the Soviet-Vietnamese naval relationship to expand over the next few years as the Soviet naval contingent at Cam Ranh Bay increases and the Vietnamese Navy receives more ships with amphibious assault and antiship capabilities. The Soviet Navy

will try especially to use more frequent, large-scale combined exercises in the South China Sea to demonstrate to the United States its growing military strength in the region, as well as to intimidate China and the ASEAN nations. Combined naval air and amphibious assault exercises would be well suited, for example, to underscore Soviet intentions to protect Vietnamese and Soviet oil exploration and drilling activities in the South China Sea. The Soviet Navy may also hold combined show-of-support exercises, including units from Soviet Pacific Fleet bases, during periods of increased hostilities on the Sino-Vietnamese border. []

The Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean

The Soviet Union probably will hold more frequent naval exercises with clients in the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas and in the Indian Ocean. Both South Yemen and Ethiopia probably will continue to welcome exercises with the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron to improve their naval capabilities and enhance their prestige, and small-scale joint landing and ASW operations in the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea probably will increase over the next several years. Moreover, the Soviets could arrange larger naval exercises to demonstrate support for Ethiopia or South Yemen during a regional crisis or to counterbalance US combined exercises in the region. []

Moscow, in our judgment, will be successful in convincing Syria to increase combined naval exercises in the Mediterranean, where the Soviet Naval Squadron directly confronts the larger and more capable US 6th Fleet. In addition to frequent small-scale ASW exercises, we expect to see more routine antiship and amphibious assault operations along the Syrian coast, especially now that the Soviets apparently are focusing on upgrading Syrian naval capabilities. (Since early 1984, Moscow has delivered a dozen small naval ships to Syria.) Although these operations could enhance Soviet influence on the Syrian Navy and improve Syrian capabilities, Moscow and Damascus probably would also intend such exercises to deter the Israelis and the United States by raising the prospect that Soviet forces might enter a regional conflict. In

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this connection, for example, the Soviet Navy might begin practicing landing in Syria either the company-sized contingent of naval infantry typically stationed in the Mediterranean or elements of its 3,000-man naval infantry brigade sealifted from the Black Sea. Syrian naval, air, and ground forces most likely would simulate attacks against the Soviet ships to practice defending their coast. []

Prospects for Combined Ground or Air Exercises

Given their growing program of combined naval exercises, we have considered whether the Soviets might over the next few years conduct joint air or ground operations with certain of their Third World clients, especially Syria. Moscow almost certainly is aware that US joint operations—especially those involving the US Rapid Deployment Force in the Middle East—have been highly successful in demonstrating US capabilities to support its distant allies and in securing closer political ties with some Middle Eastern countries. []

From a Soviet perspective, air or ground exercises with Third World clients would provide:

- Experience in handling the considerable logistic problems that would be associated with the deployment of air or ground forces some distance from the USSR.
- Familiarization with foreign military facilities and local environments and the chance to operate with the Third World country's military forces in preparation for potential Soviet intervention in the region.
- More flexibility in strengthening its show of support for a client. The deployment of Soviet ground or air forces into a country would be seen as an even firmer sign of Soviet backing than conducting combined naval exercises.

The USSR, however, would have to balance these potential gains against the risk that its allies could misinterpret combined exercises as a firmer commitment of Soviet forces than Moscow is willing to make. The introduction of Soviet forces—even just for combined exercises—probably also would raise concerns by other regional states that such activity could escalate into a confrontation between the superpowers. []

We believe that over the next decade the Soviets may practice moving small representative units of their ground and air forces into an area to exercise with client forces in response to a hypothetical regional crisis. They probably would exercise only with countries that are close enough to make the projection of forces reasonably practical, like Syria, Ethiopia, or South Yemen. For example, Moscow might exercise an airlift of an airborne regiment or an air defense unit or send a tactical fighter squadron into Syria to practice for such a contingency during an invasion by Israel. This type of exercise would demonstrate Soviet intentions to support Syria, improve Soviet capabilities to conduct a limited airlift to the region, and perhaps serve as a political deterrent to an Israeli invasion. The Soviets would have to consider carefully the timing of such an exercise, however. During periods of rising tensions, these operations could be perceived by the Israelis as actual prepositioning of Soviet troops and equipment for hostilities and could risk escalation to a larger crisis. []

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